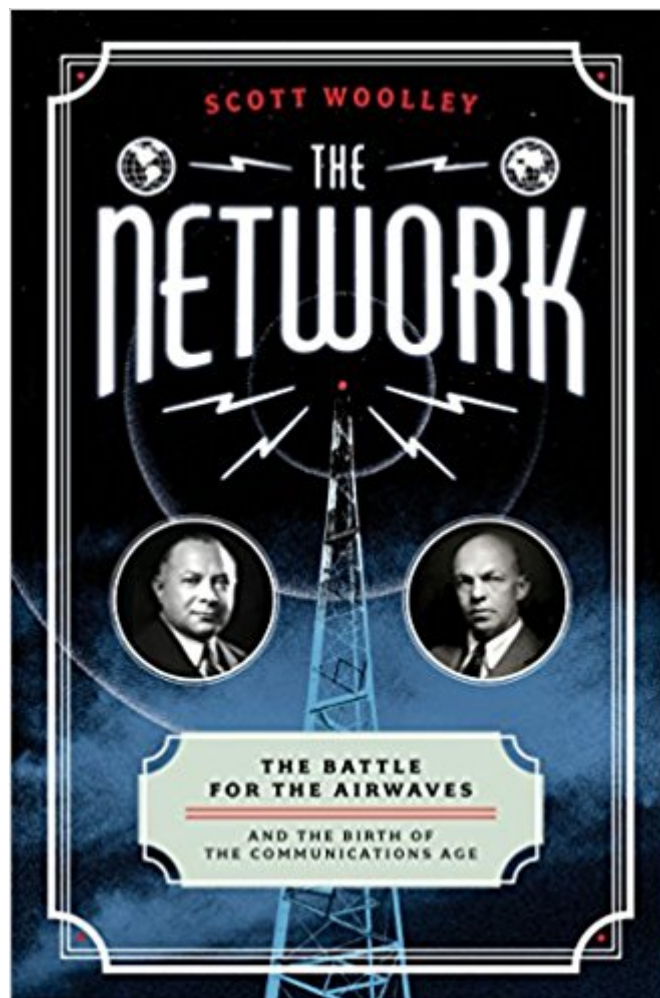




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The Network: The Battle For The Airwaves And The Birth Of The Communications Age



Synopsis

The astonishing story of America's airwaves, the two friends—one a media mogul, the other a famous inventor—who made them available to us, and the government which figured out how to put a price on air. This is the origin story of the airwaves—the foundational technology of the communications age—as told through the forty-year friendship of an entrepreneurial industrialist and a brilliant inventor. David Sarnoff, the head of RCA and equal parts Steve Jobs, Jack Welch, and William Randolph Hearst, was the greatest supporter of his friend Edwin Armstrong, developer of the first amplifier, the modern radio transmitter, and FM radio. Sarnoff was convinced that Armstrong's inventions had the power to change the way societies communicated with each other forever. He would become a visionary captain of the media industry, even predicting the advent of the Internet. In the mid-1930s, however, when Armstrong suspected Sarnoff of orchestrating a cadre of government officials to seize control of the FM airwaves, he committed suicide. Sarnoff had a very different view of who his friend's enemies were. Many corrupt politicians and corporations saw in Armstrong's inventions the opportunity to commodify our most ubiquitous natural resource—the air. This early alliance between high tech and business set the precedent for countless legal and industrial battles over broadband and licensing bandwidth, many of which continue to influence policy and debate today.

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Customer Reviews

Great topic and an engrossing narrative! Hey, I'm an electrical engineer, so I like this kind of stuff. I appreciate the author's hard work in creating a fascinating narrative describing the early history of wireless communication. I would have given this book five stars except for a few shortcomings that I think are fixable. I shall list those here: (1) Obviously the author is not an electrical engineer. This is evident by the strange, puzzling descriptions he gives of technical concepts. For example, this head scratcher is from location 187 of the Kindle edition: "[Armstrong] built a device that made it easy for a radio transmitter to summon the invisible waves." My best guess here is that this refers to some sort of electronic oscillator, but I honestly can't tell for sure. Clear, concise, correct high-level descriptions of the various technical concepts mentioned -- descriptions that use standard terms correctly and are reasonably comprehensible to the lay public -- ARE possible. The author ought to work with a sympathetic electrical engineer to get the phrasing right. (2) The non-chronological presentation is a great way to keep the reader's interest: First, a scene with tension and conflict is presented; then (with the reader's interest piqued and before the resolution is presented) the history leading up to that scene is presented. But in the early chapters, in particular, this gets confusing at times. On a re-read, everything seems to make sense. But it would be better if things were clear the first time through, so some rewriting might be needed to effect this. (3) The book has a lot of typos and other editorial errors. These are the errors I noted in today's reading session as I finished the book (Kindle edition): Location 1938: "[And] endless parade of witnesses followed ..." -> "[An] endless ..." Location 2172: "... which could [only] afford to produce only low-budget dreck" -> "... which could afford to produce only ..." Location 2594: "... what could have been [in] the two friends had remained allies." -> "... what could have been [if] the two friends had remained allies." Location 2847: "Johnson had assembled what the [the] New York Times described ..." -> "Johnson had assembled what the New York Times described ..." Location 3275: "With AT&T [was] focused on MCI's antitrust lawsuit, ..." -> "With AT&T focused on MCI's antitrust lawsuit, ..." Location 3370: "... began challenge the web of expensive telegraph cables ..." -> "... began [to] challenge the web of expensive telegraph cables ..." There were a lot of errors before location 1938, too. I had observed them in earlier reading sessions, but neglected to note them. The author's discovery of Sarnoff's 1965 speech is a wonderful contribution to the history of technology. I was

interested in seeing the original transcript of Sarnoff's speech, but had no luck locating it via Google. The author refers the reader to his evolving web site, battlefortheairwaves.com, for source materials, but neither that speech nor much of anything else was at that site.

Empire of the Air told the story of DeForest, Armstrong and Sarnoff and left the impression that Sarnoff was a Machiavellian creep. This book paints a somewhat different picture and returns at least a degree of humanity to Sarnoff's legacy. And what a legacy it is. Sarnoff did not single-handedly build RCA, NBC, etc. but he was single minded in his promotion of the airwaves as a means of broadcasting both sounds and images, not to mention two-way communications, which he helped revolutionize. He even had a remarkably prescient vision of what became the Internet, way back in 1966. The book is well written and beautifully paced.

Remember the lies your teacher told you? Kids used to learn that Edison invented everything ever related to electricity, not only light bulbs but the machinery that controls our city lights. Not true. Edison was a good salesman but George Westinghouse did the lights. Who knew? Likewise, David Sarnoff, the founder of RCA and NBC, only reached the 8th grade, worked for Marconi delivering telegrams and skyrocketed to company management after studying the technology and it was noticed that he could explain it in English to prospective investors. An under-water telegraph cable was being laid across the Atlantic for the stock market but Sarnoff saw that it wasn't enough. The ultimate communications medium should be wireless and transmit images. Those dreams became his goals and, from telegraph to television, he was able to work with engineers, scientists and businessmen to set the intermediate goals, identify the leading-edge inventions and inventors who were most likely to succeed, put them all together and then sell it to the world. There are myriad big, big names to honor in this interesting story where Sarnoff played one of the leading roles.

A fascinating, if uneven, account of the professional life of David Sarnoff, who was intimately involved in the founding of every major communications technology from the telegraph through to satellite communications, and predicted with uncanny accuracy in 1965 the advent of the Internet. I really enjoyed the book, which alternates among several key players in the growth of communications technology in the first two thirds of the 20th century. The author took care to research the material well enough to place the reader aside Sarnoff, his sometimes friend and compatriot, David Armstrong, and others as they navigate coastal radio towers and research laboratories, the halls of power in Washington and New York. Unfortunately, the narrative at

times runs off the rails and sometimes feels a bit contrived. I was particularly surprised when the main running thread -- the growing chasm between Sarnoff and Armstrong -- climaxed suddenly and without enough emotional heft placed behind the story of a friendship gone awry amid the pressures of a disruptive, and lucrative, new industry. I've never written a book, but I've written plenty of stories, and to me, this one felt like trying to force a narrative that either wasn't there or the writer didn't have enough material to completely support. Still, it was a very enjoyable and informative read that I'd happily recommend to fans of technology, the communications industry or American business and politics.

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